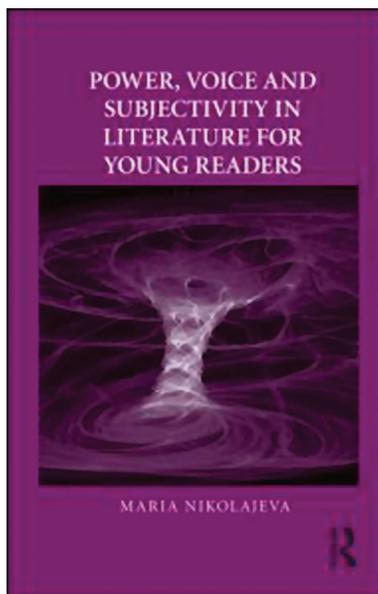


A theory of one's own

Review of Maria Nikolajeva: *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers.*
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Maria Nikolajeva has been a role model both for myself and numerous other children's literature researchers in spe. Therefore, being assigned the task of reviewing the work of such a nestor is a terrifying one. One of my late grandmother's sayings springs to mind: "One shouldn't try to teach one's own mother how babies are made." Indeed, I don't intend to.

To start with the very beginning one notices that Nikolajeva has chosen "Literature for Young Readers," rather than "Children's Literature" in her title. Perhaps the answer to this is to find in her discussion whether it in the future will be more common to draw a distinction between "children's literature," as in written *by* children, and "literature *for* children." As a continuation of this thought, she concludes that there is no need to choose between the perspectives of "childist

criticism" and making advantage of our perspective as adult readers (5). Generally, Nikolajeva can be said to be a good example that it is not mutually exclusive to be a so-called "book person" and "child person."

In the introductory chapter Nikolajeva maintains the need for a children's literature specific theory, which she states is not yet elaborated, analogous to other "marginalized literatures," as feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory. She explains that her aim in this study is "[...] not to address the question of what children's literature is and what it does [...]. Instead, I would like to explore possible ways of approaching children's literature from a theoretical perspective, thus responding to the recent tendency to reject theory as such" (1). Although arguing against the claim that we have no need for theory, she agrees that "in our field we have always been slightly more pragmatic" (2) than in some fields of literature studies, where theory and meta-theory is valued for its own sake, not merely as a tool for analyzing texts. Although rejecting theory with no direct function, she argues strongly in favor for the importance of theory: "Unless we position ourselves in a theoretical field, as well as establish ourselves in relationship to previous research, we keep reinventing the wheel" (6). I am totally in line with the claim that we need theory, finding it in fact a little discouraging that it should even be necessary to keep justifying such a position. What the *grounds* for a children's literature specific theory should be is, the way I see it, a more pressing discussion. I think Nikolajeva touches upon an important problem when she points out that "Those children's literature scholars who

claim that theory has had its day direct their skepticism primarily against general critical theory, without acknowledging that children's literature theory as such has never emerged yet" (4). To break the discussion into smaller parts seems crucial; a discussion for or against "theory" in the broadest sense can easily be somewhat confusing.

I appreciate how Nikolajeva's contribution to developing the field has always been done not by separating it from the larger context, but rather in connection with literary studies in general. She argues that using the so-called "literary-didactic blend" as a criterion for distinguishing children's literature from other literature is not functional, as all literature can be both (7). I agree. I think one of the most important factors concerning a theoretical platform for the field is that the elaboration of a children's literature specific theory should not mean further sectioning; especially in these interdisciplinary times. In fact, I think most theory potentially can be just as relevant for analyzing literature for young readers as any other literature; it is more a question of doing it in a fruitful way than of whether one given theory is more suited than another. When it comes to interdisciplinary approaches Nikolajeva seems to embrace it, though a little reluctantly, warning against getting "engulfed" by other fields of study as a result (5).

The book consists of 12 chapters, providing a great variety of subjects, as well as primary texts covering a huge span of times, areas, and genres. I hope to be forgiven for not going equally specific into each separate chapter, and I also admit to having more of a qualified contribution to make in some areas than others. This said, I also enjoyed the chapters on more unfamiliar subjects, as the one on fantasy in the Soviet era: The lesson to be learned from these stories was that accepting benefits that had not been earned solely by your own hard work automatically would dismiss you as a hero (this attitude would certainly disqualify a great number of beloved characters from, for example, British literature). A chapter I particularly enjoyed was the one in which Nikolajeva discusses what she calls "the identification fallacy": "The conviction that young readers must adopt the subject position of a literary character [...]" (185). In this chapter Nikolajeva gives several interesting examples of texts where, for a variety of different reasons, the reader is not invited to identify with one particular character, showing that "[...] engagement is not the same as identification" (191).

AETONORMATIVITY

The specific theoretical concept the book is centered around, is that of heterology, as Nikolajeva explains:

Searching desperately for answers to the basic questions of my own scholarly pursuits, and moving successively away from traditional structuralism as well as pure narrative theory, I came across the term *heterology* ('discourse on the Other,' coined, as far as I know, by Michel de Certeau, 1986), the inquiry into imbalance, inequality, asymmetry between different social groups; an umbrella concept for several critical positions dealing with power and discrimination generated by the difference in gender, class, nationhood, or race. (8)

Nikolajeva explains that she has been "Borrowing some basic ideas from queer theory and carnival theory to develop more all-embracing heterological analytical tools [...]" (10–11). A key concept throughout the book is that of "aetonormativity," constructed from queer theory's concept of "heteronormativity." Queer theory has shed light upon the tradition for regarding the heterosexual as the norm and the homosexual as other to this norm. Nikolajeva transports this to how the adult is treated as norm, and the child as other: "[...] a heterological approach to juvenile literature will examine power tension between the adult author and the implied young audience" (8). I find this a creative continuation of queer theory, as well as a fruitful concept. "Few authors interrogate their own norms [...]" (182) Nikolajeva claims. But in line with her own argument that theory should be put to use rather than discussed, Nikolajeva quickly goes on to show rather than tell: Throughout the book, we are presented with numerous examples of how aetonormativity manifests itself in children's literature. One recurring argument is that in children's books the adult is often presented as superior and the child in need of some kind of "improvement." Nikolajeva shows how when the child is ostensibly empowered, this power is often in some way or other restricted, the adult's values and supremacy being present at some level or at least restored in the end. Of course, aetonormativity will necessarily be somewhat different from heteronormativity, as aetonormativity at least sometimes must be said to have positive inclinations; a grown-up's authority can also be beneficial for the child, as Nikolajeva shows in the examples of Brazilian authors Lygia Bojunga and Ana Maria Machado, although, as is

shown time and again, the argument of a positive adult authority is easy to use as an excuse for exercising power. There are also some examples that a child is not always *below* a grown-up in a power hierarchy, as in the case of Huckleberry Finn and the runaway slave Jim. One could probably also add here plenty of examples of rich children harassing their family's domestic servants¹.

OTHERING THE DIFFERENCE

At the end of the chapter on gender in young adult (YA) novels, Nikolajeva questions the authors' positions:

Do YA novels reflect what the adult authors believe to be the contemporary teenagers' genuine experience? Or do they provide guidance from clever adults to the innocent adolescents? Or do they, as so much of children's literature, convey the adults' nostalgic memories of their own youth? Whatever, they hardly seem to show the contemporary teenagers' view of themselves. (120)

But is it really that impossible for grown-up authors to identify with their teenage characters? Aren't we all, at some level, still the same pimpled creatures of our teen years; painfully aware of our own imperfections, but hoping that someone will like us anyway?

This train of thought made me realize what I had been missing in some of the discussions about othering: Nikolajeva states that "[...] an adult author can no better 'take the child's side' than a white author can wholly take a black character's side or a male author wholly take a female character's side, and so on, as heterological studies make us aware of" (49). This is the core of my difficulty to fully agree with some of the arguments raised in the book: I think it sometimes leaves too little room for a more complex exploring of what makes a person similar or different to another. In one mentioning of queer theory, Nikolajeva writes that "[...] the terminology provided by feminist or queer theories is limited since it focused either on the binary female/male (alternately feminine/masculine) or heterosexual/homosexual" (105). I don't think it is made quite clear enough in what *way* queer theory has been concerned with these binaries, which is by

fundamentally *questioning* them. Nikolajeva describes Elias in Katarina Kieri's *Does Elias dance? No!* as a "quasi male," and Charlotte in Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* as a "quasi-woman." To call someone that, one must have a pretty clear notion of what a "real male" and a "real woman" is. I fully acknowledge the importance of exposing and focusing on hidden power hierarchies; to ignore these continues the oppressive structures. But at the same time there is always the risk, as for example Judith Butler reminds us, of reproducing norms in the process of naming them. When discussing othering one should therefore be aware of the risk of *stressing* the otherness, of contributing to maintaining the focus on difference at the expense of common experiences. In the passage above, that it is impossible for an adult author to "wholly" take a child's side, a white author to take a black character's side, a male author to take a female character's side, and so on, I find it decisive what is meant by the word "wholly" in this context. In what way is my experience of being a woman similar to another woman's, and in what way is this experience different from a man's, making him unable to "wholly" take my side? Nikolajeva writes that "Writing from a disempowered perspective, women authors have vaster experience of alterity and can show more solidarity with a young character as such, and an opposite-gender narrator in particular" (137). In my opinion, that is too general a claim.

THE LINAS AND THE LAURAS

Among the numerous titles discussed in the book, I wanted to choose a few concrete titles to discuss a little more elaborately and the urge to come to Emma Hamberg's and Johanna Thydell's rescue when reading the chapter "New Masculinities, New Femininities" decided the matter. Nikolajeva sees the characters Jenna in Johanna Thydell's *The Stars Are Shining on the Ceiling* and Lina in Hamberg's *Lina's Noctuary* as representatives for a new femininity, of which sex and alcohol are "the two essential components" (113): "Judging by this novel [*The Stars Are Shining on the Ceiling*] and others appearing during the last few years, urban girls in Sweden normally get blind drunk every Friday when they are twelve, have their first sexual experience at thirteen, and are daily sub-

¹ I think, for example, some of the points made by Seth Lerer in his discussion of childhood power and slavery in Classical Antiquity in the first chapter of his *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) can have general relevance concerning relations between grownup servants and children.

jected to rape, incest and drugs” (113). One of Nikolajeva’s concerns is that “[...] the new stereotype is provided by adults, apparently as a role model rather than a cautionary tale” (113). She further claims that *The Stars Are Shining on the Ceiling* “[...] presents every possible cliché, without ever attempting to question them” (112). I think the “clichés” about femininity are, in fact, highly questioned in the book, particularly through the portrayal of Jenna’s classmate Ullis, who is obviously acting out due to severe problems. Likewise, Nikolajeva calls the story of Jenna’s mother’s terminal cancer for a “side theme” in the novel, the “main plot” being Jenna’s entering into teenage life, without addressing the connection between the two themes. This new female stereotype is, according to Nikolajeva, also represented by Hamberg’s Lina: “Like Jenna, Lina has no intellectual interests: she never reads, she has neither hobbies nor academic ambitions, she never talks about anything significant with her friend. Judging from what she reveals about herself, it is remarkable that she can express herself in written form, even though the language is deliberately meager and childish” (113). Nikolajeva sees Lina as “[...] a full-size portrait of the new femininity: ignorant, immature, solipsistic, focused on her own sexuality on a primitive, superficial level, perceiving herself as a sexual object, eager to please the male” (113–114). Firstly, this description is not at all fair to Lina: Her story is one of *escaping* the role as a superficial teenager, being on the verge of depression due to heavy peer pressure, and finally finding the strength to stand up for herself. It is by the way not the male she is most eager to please; her literally “pleasing the male” (while struggling to hold back her tears) is done to meet her female friends’ expectations. As to her thoughts on sexuality; for example her reflections around whether the opposite of being “innocent” is being “guilty” are, in my opinion, anything but primitive. All in all I found this characterization of

an insecure 15-year-old girl rather harsh. Moreover, dismissing Lina and her likes indirectly means dismissing the many real-life readers who identify with her.

Though not directly as an offset to this stereotype, maybe more as to *any* stereotype, Nikolajeva analyses the main character of Katharina Kieri’s *Not a Greek God, Exactly*, the clever and intellectual Laura, whom Nikolajeva sees as a heir to Jo March, the artist-to-be. I wish to point out that I totally agree with the praise of the complex characterization of Laura. My objection concerns rather the depreciation of the characters labeled “new females.” Neither do I question the differentiation between them and Laura so much as the *degree* of it: Lina realizes it was an unlucky coincidence how she came to be the dominating Thea’s best friend from an early age. It could thus be argued that one of the main differences between her and Laura is that the latter has been luckier with the people surrounding her.

I am aware that none of this nullifies what seems to be Nikolajeva’s more general concern about what role models teenage girls of today face. What I ask for is simply a further look beyond the stereotypical behavior of these “new” girls, thus to a lesser degree equating their doing with their being.

INSPIRED AND INSPIRING

If one of Nikolajeva’s aims in this book was to show the relevance of approaching children’s literature from a theoretical perspective, this particular reader was in no need of being convinced in the first place, but rather had her beliefs solidly reconfirmed by Nikolajeva’s learned and insightful analyses. Nikolajeva’s writing is always inspired and, as I have hopefully been able to show, also *inspiring*.